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2021

## AURELIAN AND SOL INVICTUS: THE RELIGIOUS REVIVAL OF ROME IN THE THIRD CENTURY

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### Recommended Citation

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AURELIAN AND SOL INVICTUS:  
THE RELIGIOUS REVIVAL OF ROME IN THE THIRD CENTURY

An Essay Submitted to the  
Office of Graduate Studies  
College of Arts & Sciences of  
John Carroll University  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts

By  
Vincent J. Paczkoskie  
2021

*And so Thersites and Sinon and other such monsters of antiquity are well known to us and will be spoken of by our descendants; but shall the Deified Aurelian, that most famous of princes, that most firm of rulers, who restored the whole world to the sway of Rome, be unknown to posterity?*<sup>1</sup>

The third century was a time of utter chaos and disorder within the Roman Empire. Roving bands of barbarians continued to pass through Rome's borders raiding as far south as Hellas in the east, the interior of Gaul in the west, and reached as far as Italia proper, raiding the settlements in the north of the peninsula. Rome's eastern rival, the Sassanid Empire, was also taking advantage of the chaos and continued to push into Rome's far eastern provinces. The emperor was chosen not through a hereditary line of succession nor by the governing body of the Senate; rather, he was chosen by the army. This led to opportunistic commanders who would be hailed as emperor by their troops and would march on Rome to seize power, leading to a continuous flow of usurpers who never held power for any significant amount of time.

This combination of internal and external turmoil would eventually lead to a fractured empire with the new Gaelic Empire seizing Gaul, Britannia, and northern Hispania, while the new Palmyrene Empire seized Syria, Palestine, and Egypt in the east. Rome seemed to be on its last legs as external enemies and internal chaos would threaten the disintegration of the Empire. As all hope seemed to be lost, one man would come to power and turn the tide. That man was Lucius Domitius Aurelianus. Aurelian came to power with the backing of the army and instilled order and stability within the Roman Empire. He was able to defeat or negotiate with barbarian invaders and push them beyond Rome's borders. With the barbarians dealt with, he then moved to bring back the rebellious Palmyrene and Gaelic Empires into the fold, as well as to repel the

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<sup>1</sup> Henderson, Jeffrey, ed. *Historia Augusta*. Translated by David Magie. III. Vol. III. III vols. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932., Divinius Aurelianus 1:5

Sassanid incursions. By bringing all parts of the Roman Empire back under one ruler, Aurelian earned the title *Restitutor Orbis*, or “Restorer of the World.”

His reign may have been short compared to the Deified Augustus, but Aurelian’s rulership brought stability and order to a fractured empire that was plagued by civil strife and external invasions for almost a century. This feat alone raises Aurelian to the ranks of the greatest emperors. Despite his many achievements, there is little scholarship on this influential emperor. Sadly, the chaos of the third century produced little in the way of sources, and so much of the material depicting the events of the third century comes about well into the fourth century.

While the scholarship on the reign of Aurelian may be thin, the opinions of the emperor’s intentions in the elevation the god of Sol within the Roman Empire are quite diverse. Because there is so little we know from the third century, many scholars are forced to look into other areas to find the answers to Aurelian’s motives. This can be seen in the less-than-reliable source of the *Historia Augusta* or by analyzing the coinage during the emperor’s reign. With so many different routes to take, it is no wonder why the speculation on Aurelian’s motives is so diverse.

Regarding Aurelian’s intentions in elevating Sol, there are two main arguments that explore what Aurelian was hoping to achieve from his actions. One argument is for the monotheistic/henotheistic state cult. This argument is voiced primarily through the author Gaston H. Halsberghe in his book *The Cult of Sol Invictus*. He argues that Aurelian ultimately wanted to phase out the older cults within the Roman Empire and replace them with monotheistic worship of the sun god Sol. Through decades, if not centuries, of continued interactions between the western and eastern halves of the Roman Empire, “Religious syncretism had become the monotheistic worship of the sun.”<sup>2</sup> This argument is also shared by John F. White in his book

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<sup>2</sup> Halsberghe, Gaston H. *The Cult of Sol Invictus*. Leiden, UK: Brill, 1972., 136

*The Roman Emperor Aurelian: Restorer of the World* which supports much of Halsberghe's position.

In contrast, there is the argument favored in this paper, of polytheism. This argument is most prevalent in Watson's work *Aurelian in the Third Century*. Did Aurelian wish to make Sol the official and only deity within the Roman Empire, or did he simply want to raise Sol to be above the other gods but not replace them? The polytheistic argument suggests that neither of these are correct. Aurelian was a religiously conservative polytheist and while he did show considerable favor to the god Sol, there was no desire to replace the old pantheon with this new god or even raise the status of the god to be above all others. The emperor was simply showing favor for a particular deity, a practice that was not uncommon amongst previous emperors.<sup>3</sup>

While Aurelian's reign was short, only around five years, not a second was wasted. The emperor reformed the currency, built a new set of walls around the city of Rome, and brought economic stability to the Empire.<sup>4</sup> However, Aurelian's most influential and widely known act that was implemented during his reign was the elevation of the cult of Sol or *Sol Invictus*, "the Unconquered Sun." Through this elevation, Sol was equal to, and some have argued even greater than, the traditional Roman pantheon of gods. But as Watson makes clear, Aurelian had no intention on replacing the old gods. Yet his interest in the cult was not solely personal. Rather, Aurelian elevated the status of an already popular cult within the Empire to bring about a religious revival to aid in the healing of Rome from wounds brought about by almost a century of chaos.

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<sup>3</sup> Turcan, Robert, and Antonia Nevill. *The Gods of Ancient Rome: Religion in Everyday Life from Archaic to Imperial Times*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrx6t.>, 142

<sup>4</sup> Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, 134

Throughout the third century, solar worship had been growing in popularity. The Severi emperors had endorsed Solar worship all through their reigns. Julia Domna, wife of Septimius Severus, was daughter to a priest of the sun god Emesa unifying the imperial throne with the eastern sun cult. His son Caracalla created a sanctuary to the sun god Serapis in Rome, while the infamous Elagabalus attempted to supersede all Roman cults for his own patron deity, Elagabal.<sup>5</sup> This popularity of solar worship was mostly due to the syncretism between western and eastern parts of the Roman Empire. While solar worship was practiced in the west, it was most prominent in the east with such gods as Elagabal and Mithras having strong solar associations. After well over two centuries of continued rule, western and eastern cultures began to influence one another, which can be seen in the eastern cults growing in popularity throughout the Empire.<sup>6</sup>

There is no doubt about the emperor's interest with the Cult of Sol. As early as January of 271 CE, coins appeared during Aurelian's first counsellorship linking the emperor with the image of a radiant lion, an image associated with solar deities in the east. By 272, Aurelian depicted himself with Sol, usually holding the charioteer's whip or a globe. But this was not itself an exceptional practice, as Jupiter continued to be the principle divine supporter of Aurelian's reign. Real change came just a year later in 273 when coinage begins to show that Sol had now supplanted Jupiter as Aurelian's divine sponsor.<sup>7</sup> Aurelian's interest in Sol starts to become more and more apparent as his reign progresses through these coins. However, these coins only depict the esteemed position of Aurelian's Sol and do not provide us with any

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis, J. "A Prince Necessary Rather Than Good": The Campaigns of Aurelian, AD 270–275. In *Nothing Less than Victory: Decisive Wars and the Lessons of History* (pp. 109-140). PRINCETON; OXFORD: Princeton University Press. 2010 doi:10.2307/j.ctt7s56t.9, 133

<sup>6</sup> The cult of Mithras was particularly popular in the Roman army while gods like *Jupiter Dolichenus* veiled an eastern deity in a Roman guise. For more information see Turcan's *The Cults of the Roman Empire*.

<sup>7</sup> Watson, Alaric. *Aurelian and the Third Century*. London, UK: Routledge, 2007, 189

concrete evidence of his specific religious policies.<sup>8</sup> Yet, we cannot ignore the efforts that Aurelian is making in promoting this new cult. A great example of this can be seen in the construction of Sol's temple in Rome.

Aurelian's construction of the temple of Sol was said to be so glorious that White describes it as "the most magnificent building to have been constructed in Rome since the Baths of Caracalla."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the amount of wealth that Aurelian expended on this building project must have been extraordinary. Zosimus tells us that Aurelian ornated the temple with all the "sacred spoils" from his campaign in Palmyra.<sup>10</sup> The building of the temple was started in early 274 CE with the consecration appearing to have occurred on December 25 of the same year. Interestingly, the date was significant to the Roman religious calendar and not the Syrian one.<sup>11</sup> Aurelian's construction of the temple would prove significant, largely because it is often referenced by ancient histories who provide the few primary sources we have on the emperor.

With the construction of the temple, Aurelian established a college of priests to Sol, ensuring the sustainment of the cult. A priesthood would help set the cult of *Sol Invictus* to be perceived just as legitimate alongside other cults within the Roman Empire. Like the traditional pantheon gods, Sol would have its own priests responsible for maintenance of the temple, religious ceremonies, and upholding the religious holidays. By doing so, Sol took on a sense of legitimacy within the Rome. Like the colleges of the other gods, the priests of Sol were chosen from among the ranks of the Roman elite, usually among the *praetoriani* and the *consulares*. This would communicate that the status as a priest of Sol carried with it a sense of prestige.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Watson, *Aurelian in the Third Century* 191

<sup>9</sup> White, John F. *The Roman Emperor Aurelian: Restorer of the World*. Barnsley, UK: Pen et Sword Military, 2020., 137

<sup>10</sup> Zosimus. *The New History*. Edited by Taylor Anderson. Odin's Classical Library, n.d, 18

<sup>11</sup> Watson, *Aurelian in the Third Century*, 191

<sup>12</sup> Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, 145

This could also assist Aurelian in gaining the support of the Roman elite who, always looking to advance themselves in the eyes of the community, would have welcomed the chance to hold a position in this new imperial sanctioned cult.

While Aurelian was establishing his cult of Sol within Rome, the emperor was also innovating the imperial cult to the emperor as well. It was not uncommon, indeed it was rather customary, to deify the previous emperor upon one's ascension to the throne. It was a practice that started with Augustus himself and lasted up to the reign of Aurelian who upon assuming the title of Emperor deified his predecessor, Claudius. The practice was a way of legitimizing the reign of the new emperor.<sup>13</sup> But Aurelian took the practice a step further. Coins during his reign add the title of *deus* next to his name, implying that the emperor was proclaiming himself to be a god in his own lifetime.<sup>14</sup> There are also Latin inscriptions from Italy, North Africa, and Spain that also apply the term *deus* to Aurelian, suggesting that he was worshiped as a god in the west during his own lifetime.<sup>15</sup> This would have greatly assisted Aurelian in his promotion of Sol. The emperor's acclaimed divinity would have expediated the process of elevating Sol exponentially.

Aurelian was clearly putting considerable effort in elevating Sol within the Roman pantheon. A magnificent temple along with a college of priests show that establishment of the cult of Sol within Rome was of interest to Aurelian. His deification would have also assisted in the elevation of Sol as a divine emperor was promoting his patron deity. Yet, this is where scholars begin to differ in their examinations of Aurelian's reign. How far did Aurelian wish to go in his promotion of the cult? Unfortunately, Aurelian's death prevents us from knowing the true intentions of this influential emperor.

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<sup>13</sup> Watson, *Aurelian in the Third Century*, 187

<sup>14</sup> White, *The Roman Emperor Aurelian* 136

<sup>15</sup> White, *Aurelian in the Third Century*, 187



### **Monotheistic/Henotheistic Argument**

Aurelian built a temple to Sol within Rome and decorates it with the spoils from his Palmyrene campaign.<sup>16</sup> He then creates a college of priests to ensure the continuation of the cult.<sup>17</sup> From afar, Aurelian seems to utilize the cult of Sol to implement a new state religion for the Roman Empire. Indeed, Aurelian does have a strong interest in Sol which can be seen in the efforts he undertakes to legitimize the cult. This has led to the popular understanding that Aurelian was implementing a new state religion worshiping the sun god Sol with himself at the head. Scholars such as Halsberghe speculate that Aurelian planned on replacing the old pantheon of gods with Sol in a henotheistic or even monotheistic state religion.

Much of the monotheistic argument finds its roots in the *Historia Augusta*. According to the *Historia Augusta*, Aurelian's mother was a priestess of a solar god in their native village.<sup>18</sup> However, the validity of this statement is questionable. This points back to the issues with the scholarship and the reliance on such texts as the *Historia Augusta*. It is easy to take such information for face value, but one should be wary of the inconsistencies and fraudulent nature of the text.<sup>19</sup> Regardless, Aurelian must have encountered Sol at some point in time. The *Historia Augusta* attempts to provide an answer. During his campaign against the Palmyrene Empire, Aurelian is said to have heard a voice from some divine form who pleaded to Aurelian and stated if he truly wished to rule the Roman Empire, he would spare the people of Palmyra. Aurelian accepted these conditions and asked for a portrait of the divine image to be made.<sup>20</sup> After defeating Zenobia's forces with the assistance of a divine intervention, Aurelian enters the town

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<sup>16</sup> Zosimus, *The New History*, 18

<sup>17</sup> Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, 144-145

<sup>18</sup> *Historia Augusta*, *Divinus Aurelianus* 4:2

<sup>19</sup> Magie comments on this statement within the *Historia Augusta*. He states that the passage made about Aurelian's mother within the *Historia Augusta* is an allusion to the cult of the sun founded in Rome.

<sup>20</sup> *Historia Augusta*, *Divinus Aurelianus* 14:2-4

of Emesa and visits the temple to Elagabal. It is here where he perceives the same divine form that assisted him in the earlier battle. He takes this as a sign and dedicates temples to this god with one being built within Rome itself.<sup>21</sup>

Halsberghe's argument goes on to show how the cult of Sol came to influence not only the state but also other cults within Rome. Such cults included Mithraism and more significantly, Christianity. The cult ultimately became a unifying symbol for the Roman Empire, as it incorporated aspects of other religious cults within its borders. "For almost half a century, Aurelian's successors supported and protected it, because it provided them with a firm basis from which to grow the Empire."<sup>22</sup> Sol would provide the stability that Aurelian sought during his reign. With the blessing of the imperial seal, the cult would enjoy the full support of the emperor which allowed Aurelian to implement it as he saw fit. "He had his own system and his own methods, and used the cult of Sol Invictus as his basis."<sup>23</sup> By 274 CE, coinage from the period depicted Sol as the official deity of the Roman Empire.<sup>24</sup>

The argument centers on the idea that Aurelian's intentions were to make the cult of Sol a monotheistic state cult for the Roman Empire. According to Halsberghe, through decades of syncretism between western and eastern traditions, the result was the monotheistic worship of the Sun.<sup>25</sup> He traces the influences of Sol within Aurelian's reign to his childhood with his mother being a priestess to a sun god and the emperor's campaign in Palmyra where he is confronted by the sun god Elagabal. Throughout his reign, Aurelian's interest in the cult continues to grow. Halsberghe uses coinage from this period to support his claim of an imperial sanctioned cult. A

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<sup>21</sup> *Historia Augusta, Divinus Aurelianus* 15:3-6

<sup>22</sup> Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, 173

<sup>23</sup> Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, 139

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, 136

coin bears the words *Sol Dominus Imperii Romani* along with a bust of the emperor.<sup>26</sup> The priesthood also makes a significant contribution to this new state cult. While the monotheistic process was already being undertaken, it did not end the existences of other cults. This, Halsberghe explains, is why priests to Sol were also priest of other imperial cults. Though it must be noted that the other gods of the imperial pantheon were only “various facets of a primal sun god.”<sup>27</sup>

Some issues come about from Halsberghe’s argument. The reasoning for the cult that he discusses is well founded. Aurelian, indeed, needed to create a moral foundation from which the newly unified Roman Empire could lean upon to continue its existence. However, a monotheistic approach is not what Aurelian had in mind. We must go back to where Halsberghe is receiving his information. Much of what the author claims about Aurelian is found within the notorious *Historia Augusta*. Halsberghe mentions both that Aurelian’s mother was priestess of Sol and of his divine encounter with the sun god Elagabal during his Palmyra campaign. Both facts are unsubstantiated. There is no other source to validate the fact that his mother was a priestess to a solar god and though the emperor may have encountered the sun god during his campaign, no other source is able to corroborate his story. The *Historia Augusta* was more than likely written well over a century after Aurelian’s reign and so the author is clearly writing in hindsight. Why did Aurelian have such an interest in Sol? The author of the work clearly attempted answer that question through such reasoning.

The *Historia Augusta* is the largest work we have on the events that occurred during the third century as it depicts the lives of prominent Romans and emperors from 117-284 CE. However, much of this work is disputed with scholars failing to verify much of the information

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<sup>26</sup> Hasberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, 139

<sup>27</sup> Hasberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, 147

contained within the work and noting that a significant portion of work is fictitious. This leads to misconceptions about these prominent Romans, in this case Aurelian. Though disputed, the *Historia Augusta* is the largest and most in depth source depicting the life of Aurelian which leads us to continue utilizing this work. Nevertheless, the information contained within its pages should be taken with a grain of salt.

Aurelian's temple to Emesa also struggles to provide a strong stance for the monotheistic argument. The *Historia Augusta* claims that the emperor built a temple to the god in Rome. The author of the text appears to be drawing a parallel with Aurelian's Sol and the emperor Elagabalus' patron deity, Elagabal. Yet other ancient historians are silent on this matter. Zosimus' account in his work *The New History* is quite short and focuses primarily on Aurelian's campaign against the Palmyrene Empire, though there is a brief section on Aurelian's rise to power as his predecessor, Quintillus, was encouraged to commit suicide so that Aurelian could take power.<sup>28</sup> Regarding Sol, Zosimus only tells us that he built a temple to the god with the spoils from the emperor's Palmyrene campaign. However, Zosimus does mention that within the temple, there were statues to the sun and a statue to Belas.<sup>29</sup> This fact contradicts the monotheistic argument, as there would be no need for Sol to share a temple with another god if it were the one supreme god.

The work *De Caesaribus* attributed the author Aurelius Victor, also provide a brief account of the temple. The translator H. W. Bird aligns with Halsberghe's argument, as seen in his commentary on the text. The book is thought to have been written between 359 and 360 CE while Victor was employed by the emperor Julian.<sup>30</sup> Victor barely mentions Aurelian's temple to

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<sup>28</sup> Zosimus, *The New History*, 14

<sup>29</sup> Belas' presence has caused much controversy as the god was not a solar deity.

<sup>30</sup> Bird, H. W., trans. *Aurelius Victor: De Caesaribus*. Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 1995. Pg. xi

the sun and only describes it as “magnificent” and decorated with “opulent offerings.” He does not provide any strong reasoning for Aurelian building the temple. However, Bird provides a comment with an explanation. He suggests that Aurelian’s building of the temple and the creation of its college of priests were political in nature. Bird notes that many Roman gods were already being associated with solar imagery and that Aurelian’s temple to Sol was to be the center of worship for the whole Rome Empire and would incorporate all other deities into the one supreme sun.<sup>31</sup>

Flavius Eutropius, author of *Abridgement of Roman History*, also provides us with another reference to Aurelian’s temple to Sol. It, too, does not corroborate Halsberghe’s monotheistic argument, as it fails to show any clear sign that Aurelian was elevating Sol to the status of a monotheistic deity. Eutropius dedicates his work to the emperor Valens suggesting that the work was completed during the emperor’s reign. Eutropius references Aurelian quelling both Zenobia and Tetricus’ rebellions in the east and west as well as provide some examples of the reforms implemented under emperor. Regarding Sol, Eutropius only mentions that Aurelian built a temple to the god and adorned it with a vast amount of gold and precious stones.<sup>32</sup> Much like Victor’s account, we only know from Eutropius that Aurelian did indeed build a temple to the sun and adorned it lavishly.

The argument against monotheism can also be seen within the priesthood dedicated to Sol. As the third and final step<sup>33</sup> in the process of how the cult of Sol was to become the official state religion of the Roman Empire, the priesthood is a strong characteristic of the monotheistic

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<sup>31</sup> Bird, *Aurelius Victor: De Caesaribus*, 150

<sup>32</sup> Eutropius, Flavius. *Eutropius's Abridgement of Roman History*. Translated by John Selby. London, UK: George Bell and Sons, 1886., 9:15

<sup>33</sup> The three steps from which Aurelian was supposedly able to create the imperial cult to Sol were coined by historian Leon Homo. These steps are still referenced by contemporary historians as seen in Halsberghe’s work.

argument. Yet, this too is not entirely correct. The priests to Sol, referred to as *Pontifices de Solis*, were often priests to other gods within the Roman pantheon. Halsberghe himself asserts that under Aurelian all the deities were considered equal including the high priests that served them.<sup>34</sup> This in itself, pulls away from the argument that Aurelian was establishing a monotheistic cult. There is no indication that Aurelian ever had the desire to eventually disband these cults. This equality amongst the cults is more reminiscent of traditional Roman religion.<sup>35</sup>

There is also the henotheistic argument regarding Aurelian's elevation of Sol. While similar, there are several distinct differences between the monotheistic and henotheistic arguments. While monotheism is the belief of one and only one supreme deity, henotheism is the belief of a supreme deity with other lesser deities being subordinate to it. It can also be interpreted as other deities being mere manifestations of the one supreme deity. Halsberghe hints at a henotheistic approach, but his ultimate argument is that Aurelian intended to elevate Sol to the position of supreme deity of the Roman Empire. A clearer henotheistic approach can be seen in White's book *The Roman Emperor Aurelian: Restorer of the World*. "The Sun was intended to be the dominant, universal religion of which all other regions were simply junior representations." Sol would stand above all other gods but did not replace them.<sup>36</sup>

White deduces that Aurelian intended to raise Sol above the other gods but still allowing the existence of other cults simply at a junior status. This is clear henotheistic interpretation to Aurelian's religious reforms. White relies heavily on evidence from coinage during this era. One example of this is coinage during the latter part of Aurelian's reign where a rare coin with the inscription *Sol Dominus Imperii Romani* (The Sun is Lord of the Roman

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<sup>34</sup> Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, 148

<sup>35</sup> Watson, *Aurelian in the Third Century*, 193

<sup>36</sup> White, *The Roman Emperor Aurelian*, 135

Empire). This implication, according to White, suggests that Sol ruled over the Roman Empire while Aurelian defended it.<sup>37</sup> However, the author also notes that during this time other pagan cults continued to flourish within the Empire.<sup>38</sup> He references the coinage when discussing how Aurelian deified himself within his lifetime adding *deus* to his name. It is widely accepted that the emperor did intend to deify himself within his lifetime. The issue comes later with the rare coin containing the inscription *Sol Dominus Imperii Romani*. This example, though, leaves us wanting. It simply does not provide use with enough information on Aurelian's intentions. As Watson states, "While these coins...confirm the exalted position that the god held in the emperor's religious scheme, they do not actually tell use as much about Aurelian's religious policies as is usually supposed."<sup>39</sup>

Regarding the temple and the priesthood, White discusses the magnificence of the temple as can be seen in his comparison between it and the Baths of Caracalla. However, he does not discuss the contents of the temple and only states an estimation of the wealth that Aurelian dedicated to the temple's construction, a figure that comes to around 15,000 pounds weight of gold and large gems from Palmyra.<sup>40</sup> Information on the priesthood is also lacking. The new *Pontifices de Solis* were on equal standing with the now *Pontifices Majores* who made up the other priesthoods. This, White interprets, was to avoid offending the other cults within Rome.<sup>41</sup> Aurelian would not have to worry about resistance to his cult if he were able to placate the many elite Romans who held positions as priests.

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<sup>37</sup> White, *The Roman Emperor Aurelian*, 137

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*

<sup>39</sup> Watson, *Aurelian in the Third Century*, 191

<sup>40</sup> White, *The Roman Emperor Aurelian*, 137

<sup>41</sup> White, *The Roman Emperor Aurelian*, 140

The monotheistic arguments make some well-informed accusations of Aurelian's intentions for the cult of Sol, but they ultimately leave us wanting. Aurelian had a clear interest in the cult's elevation but there is no indication that the emperor planned upon subverting the other cults of the Roman Empire. He established a new temple, yet it he did not discourage the attendance of other temples. He creates a college of priests, yet these priests did not carry any more authority than their contemporaries and membership in both in the college of Sol and other cults was not uncommon. If Aurelian did not intend on replacing the other cults in the Empire with Sol, what were his intentions?

### **Polytheism Argument**

This leaves us with the polytheistic argument. In his discussion of Aurelian and the god Sol, Watson takes a unique path in his analysis. While both Halsberghe and White are of the opinion that Aurelian intended to have Sol as the head of a new state religion, Watson argues that Aurelian's interest in Sol was personal in nature. Regarding the emperor, "it is clear that everything he did was very much in keeping with the traditions of ancient Roman religious practices."<sup>42</sup> Indeed, while Aurelian did hold the god to high esteem, there seems to be no strong evidence that he intended to replace the old religious order. Arguments for monotheism and henotheism rely heavily on both the coinage during Aurelian's reign and the emperor's biography in the *Historia Augusta*. Much has already been said about the unreliability of the *Historia Augusta* with many "facts" contained within the work being unverified or even confirmed to be fictitious. The coins, too, do not tell the whole story. While they show Aurelian's favor for Sol, they do not tell us what the emperor's religious policies were.

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<sup>42</sup> Watson, *Aurelian in the Third Century*, 197



The temple and priesthood also seem to support the polytheistic argument. Aurelian spent a great amount of wealth in constructing the temple to Sol. Indeed, much of the spoils from his Palmyrene campaign were implemented in its construction. Yet, it was not uncommon for emperors to invest greatly in the architecture of the city. Aurelian simply focused on Sol. The priesthood, too, is in line with polytheism being very much alive during the reign of Aurelian. Halsberghe, White, and Watson acknowledge that the *Pontifices de Solis* never exceed the authority of the traditional *Pontifices Majores*. In fact, priests could be active members in both cults and proudly serve both Sol and another traditional polytheistic deity. If Aurelian truly wanted to phase out the old religious order, it would not have made sense for the emperor to keep all colleges of priests equal. If Aurelian were simply incorporating a new solar deity into the Roman pantheon, however, he would not have to worry about offending the old order while also securing a place for his new patron deity in the pantheon. It should also be noted that Aurelian's religious title never changes during his reign. He continues to use the title *Pontifex Maximus* thus showing his authority over all cults within Rome, new and old.

The author Dmitriev Sviatoslav makes a compelling argument when discussing the *pomerium* as it shows the significance of Sol's temple. By adding the temple to Sol within the legal boundaries of Rome, the legitimacy of the cult would increase immensely. Perhaps these ancient historians recognized this significance. The people of Rome would have known of the temple's construction and of Aurelian's promotion of the cult. With such a significant undertaking, it would make sense that the ancient historians saw the considerable effort Aurelian put into the temple's construction. It clearly warranted a place amongst the emperor's other achievements such as the building of walls around the city of Rome and reform to the currency that stabilized the economy. By time Aurelian had built his temple and commissioned the college

of priests to perform the required rituals for the cult, it was already what we today would consider “late” in the emperor’s reign. Aurelian would be assassinated less than a year after the temple’s construction.

While Watson’s argument is the most favorable in these circumstances, it too has some issues. The main issue with Watson’s argument is that it simply does not explain the vast efforts Aurelian went through in promoting and legitimizing Sol in the eyes of the Roman people. It seems to downplay the emperor’s efforts to simply say that it was his own personal interest that motivated Aurelian to promote the cult of Sol. It also does not account for extension of the *pomerium* that Sviatoslav discusses within his article. Placing the new temple to Sol within the boundaries of the *pomerium* would have placed the temple within the legal boundaries of Rome itself. This would have greatly added to the legitimacy of the cult. If it were simply personal interest, Aurelian could have built the temple anywhere. Yet, he chose to do so within the *pomerium* itself.

Aurelian was also known to have been a “conservative” polytheist. This does not mean he was essentially a “devout” polytheist but rather he understood the inclusiveness that polytheism offered. Just as emperors have before and after him, Aurelian utilized several different gods to legitimate his reign or to portray himself in a particular light. Early in this reign at around 271 CE, Aurelian depicted himself on coinage that associated him with Mars and Hercules. Both gods were instrumental in portraying the values of the emperor. Mars represented Aurelian’s (and his armies) courage or *virtues* while Hercules embodied the emperor’s valor.<sup>43</sup> Both of these characteristics would help legitimate his rule through association with these two

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<sup>43</sup> Watson, *Aurelian in the Third Century*, 184

deities. In this way, Aurelian could show not only was he favored by the gods, but he shared the divine characteristics of the gods.

Aurelian had no qualms with associating himself with Roman gods to provide legitimacy to his reign. This goes to show the practical nature of Aurelian that is not often discussed. Aurelian ruled over a vast empire that incorporated many different cultures and religions. One religion that was growing steadily since its founding in 33 CE was Christianity. Aurelian's practicality can best be seen in his relationship with the early Christian communities. Two Christian sources depict the reign of Aurelian, Lactantius' *De Mortibus Persecutorum* and Eusebius' *The History of the Church*. The accounts from these two early Church fathers provide us with a Christian perspective of the emperor whose religious policies would have affected them considerably. Aurelian's involvement with this significant minority group within the Roman Empire shows us how Aurelian was willing to work with such groups within the Empire and thus understood the practicality of not alienating them from Rome.

Lactantius' portrayal of Aurelian, though brief, is nonetheless discerning. His work *De Mortibus Persecutorum* (translated as "On the Death of Persecutors") depicts the lives of Roman emperors who actively carried out persecutions against the early Christian communities or eventually planned to do so. Aurelian is among those listed, and though he did not actively persecute the Christian communities during his reign, it is suggested by Lactantius that he had planned to do so. "Aurelian was by nature fierce and headstrong; and although he remembered Valerian's captivity, he forgot his crime and punishment<sup>44</sup> and provoked the wrath of God by his own cruel deeds."<sup>45</sup> He would go on to discuss how Aurelian's plans for persecution were

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<sup>44</sup> During his reign, Valerian conducted a particularly brutal persecution of the early Christian communities.

<sup>45</sup> Lactantius. *De Mortibus Persecutorum*. Edited by Henry Chadwick. Translated by J. L. Creed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1984.

thwarted by divine intervention, which is interpreted through the emperor's eventual assassination.<sup>46</sup>

Eusebius, on the other hand, portrays Aurelian in a less condemning way. In fact, his portrayal of the emperor starts off rather positive. During the emperor's reign, the Church was reeling from internal issues, as the Bishop of Antioch, Paul of Samosata, was excommunicated on the grounds of heresy and was forced to relinquish his residence in the city. When Paul refuses to leave, the Church appealed to emperor Aurelian who "gave a perfectly just decision on the course to be followed: he ordered the building to be assigned to those to whom the bishops of the religion in Italy and Rome addressed the letter."<sup>47</sup> In this passage, Eusebius appears to be portraying Aurelian in a rather positive light. Here is the Roman emperor, a polytheist, assisting the Church in an internal dispute and ruling in its favor. Not only is the mediation significant, but this is also the first time an emperor was actively involved in Church affairs, years before the reign of Constantine.<sup>48</sup> Yet, it should be noted that Eusebius does state that Aurelian at the very least was contemplating a persecution of the Christian communities. "But as his reign went on, he changed his attitude towards us and was now pressed by some of his advisors to instigate a persecution against us..."<sup>49</sup> Similarly to Lactantius' account, Aurelian is struck down through divine intervention thus saving the Christian communities for their fate.

Christian sources are curiously silent on the matter regarding Aurelian's elevation of Sol. Indeed, while both Lactantius and Eusebius discuss Aurelian's reign only briefly, they differ on the Aurelian's involvement within the Christian community with Eusebius discussing how the

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid*

<sup>47</sup> Eusebius. *Church History*. Translated by G A Willianson. New York: Dorset Press, 1965. 30:11

<sup>48</sup> Hurley, Patrick. "Some Thoughts on the Emperor Aurelian as 'Persecutor.'" *Classical World* 106, no. 1 (2012): 75–89. <https://doi.org/10.1353/clw.2013.0017>. Pg. 81

<sup>49</sup> Eusebius, *Church History*, 30:12

emperor mediated an internal dispute within the Church. However, both theologians are under the consensus that Aurelian at some time intended on renewing persecutions against the Christian communities. While the previous sources at the very least mention that the temple was built, both Lactantius and Eusebius are silent on the temple's construction. There may be some reasoning behind this. Halsberghe notes that by the beginning of the fourth century, the cult of Sol Invictus was already gaining popularity within the Roman Empire and became a rival for Christianity. This led to Church fathers such as Arnobius and Lactantius to attack the cult.<sup>50</sup> This may explain the lack of any references in Lactantius and Eusebius' work. Perhaps the Church Fathers thought it unwise to comment on the beautification of the pagan temple. If that were the case, though, it would have been just as easy to condemn the actions as decadent or misplaced. Still, there is no concrete idea on what Lactantius' and Eusebius thought of Aurelian's involvement with Sol.

Lactantius and Eusebius differ in their accounts of Aurelian. Yet, we must look about again to Eusebius' account of Aurelian's intervention with the Church and Paul of Samosata. Hurley investigates in his article "Some Thoughts on the emperor Aurelian as 'Persecutor.'" The article sheds light on the practical nature of Aurelian as it shows that the emperor was willing to involve himself in the affairs of the Christian Church. In his article, Hurley disproves Lactantius and Eusebius' assertions that Aurelian had any desire to conduct a persecution of the Christian communities. He goes on to discuss several different aspects to counter this claim, one of which is the inadequacy of the source material. "It should be noted that neither source offers any real proof that Aurelian was going to initiate a persecution, and the connection of both Eusebius and Lactantius to a patron [Constantine] who was always looking to augment his own reputation

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<sup>50</sup> Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, 168

(sometimes at the expense of others) makes the claim of Aurelian as a ‘would be’ persecutor look suspicious, if not completely unfounded and incorrect.”<sup>51</sup>

What Hurley essentially states is that both Lactantius and Eusebius wanted to portray Aurelian as a “would be” persecutor to enhance the prestige of their patron Constantine who is credited as the first Christian emperor. However, regarding Sol, one must note an important trait attributed to Aurelian, his practical nature. In his argument, Hurley suggests that Aurelian’s pragmatic side would have overruled any plans for a persecution.<sup>52</sup> The emperor would have nothing to gain from alienating yet another group within the Roman Empire. Also, by assisting the Church, Aurelian also begins to smooth the integration of the old Palmyrene Empire that had only recently been brought back into the fold.<sup>53</sup> By assisting a very influential community in territory that was only recently reincorporated into the Roman Empire, Aurelian could lessen the chances of another revolt much like the one conducted by Zenobia.

### **The Revival**

Both arguments bring to light some key points regarding Aurelian’s intentions in elevating Sol. However, neither seem to clearly comprehend the challenges Aurelian faced during his reign. One must remember that Aurelian had only recently brought peace to the Roman Empire. During this time, however, no one knew how long it would last. If Aurelian put forth significant effort towards replacing the other cults of the Roman Empire with Sol, he would risk distancing himself from most of the empire. Likewise, if Aurelian were to renew persecutions against the Christian communities at this time, he would only be alienating yet another group within the empire. Though the Christians were still a minority within the Roman

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<sup>51</sup> Hurley, Patrick. “Some Thoughts on the Emperor Aurelian as ‘Persecutor.’” *Classical World* 106, no. 1 (2012): 75–89. <https://doi.org/10.1353/clw.2013.0017>, 84

<sup>52</sup> Hurley, “Some Thoughts on Aurelian,” 76.

<sup>53</sup> Hurley, “Some Thoughts on Aurelian,” 80

Empire and did not have the influence that they held during the reign of Constantine, they were still a significant group with their Bishops holding considerable sway over their congregations.

The Rome Empire was still fragile after years of civil unrest and uprooting a religious institution that had existed for centuries, as well as renewing persecutions against minority groups such as the Christians, would bring confusion to the Empire and make many more enemies than friends. The prominent Romans that held priestly roles would lose their esteemed positions and the prestige that came with it. It would alienate large swaths of the population who were practicing the conventional polytheistic traditions. The elevation of Sol to a henotheistic or monotheistic state religion would have further worsened relations with the growing Christian communities in the Roman Empire. Indeed, the cult may have led to Aurelian being much less tolerant to the Christians as they would have not recognized Aurelian's new solar deity.<sup>54</sup>

After reviewing Aurelian's pragmatism as seen through his cooperation with the early Christian Church, it looks as if the emperor had no intention on dividing Rome on religious grounds. Therefore, a shift toward a monotheistic state cult would be unwarranted. Yet, personal interest could not justify the lengths Aurelian went through in elevating Sol. What this leaves us with is a religious revival of the old order that would prove to be more useful in providing stability to Rome. One must remember the time from which Aurelian reigned. The Empire was finally under one rule, but it was far from fully healed. Years of civil unrest and external invasions had taken a toll on the empire. Faith in the emperor would have diminished as the position was given to whoever controlled the army at that time, a criterion that meant a relatively quick turnover rate as opportunistic commanders would jump at any possibility to rule. However,

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<sup>54</sup> White, *The Roman Emperor Aurelian*, 140

Aurelian needed the people to have faith in him and to show that he was indeed favored by the gods. The key to accomplish this goal was through Sol.

As Southern states, “Aurelian’s religious policy was to restore old values in a new guise, to unify the Empire, to exclude no one except the most intransigent, and to support his own reign with himself as the earthly but divine intermediary...”<sup>55</sup> “Old values in a new guise” is a perfect statement to show Aurelian’s intentions. Aurelian wanted to show that things were now starting to go back to normal. He had the favor of the gods and peace had been restored to the Roman Empire. But Aurelian’s reforms would not be enough. It was not enough merely to build another temple to Mars, Jupiter, or the other traditional gods. Additional steps needed to be taken. A revival of the of the pantheon was needed to bring faith back to the gods and show the citizens of the Roman Empire that a new era of peace and prosperity was upon them. A new era was needed, as well as a new god. The god Sol was already popular during Aurelian’s reign as syncretism between western and eastern cultures had become more and more apparent.

The *Historia Augusta* provides an example of this syncretism through the development of Aurelian’s encounter with the god Elagabal and his creation of the cult of Sol. Yet, Aurelian’s encounter with Elagabal in Syria is a great sign that the text was written well after the death of Aurelian as there is a clear sense of hindsight being used. The author is clearly associating Aurelian’s *Sol Invictus* with the failed attempt of the emperor Elagabalus to promote his solar deity Elagabal. However, this is unsubstantiated. As Watson states, “the disgrace and *damnatio memoriae* suffered by the adolescent emperor Elagabalus and the nature of the cult he championed, renders this an unlikely choice of model for Aurelian’s new religion.”<sup>56</sup> The disgrace of the emperor Elagabalus’ reign would have still been remembered by many Romans

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<sup>55</sup> Southern, Pat. *The Roman Empire from Severus to Constantine*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2002., 124

<sup>56</sup> Watson, *Aurelian in the Third Century*, 194



during the reign of Aurelian so it would not have been wise to associated oneself with a rather unstable emperor.

Elagabalus' religious policies are often compared to that of Aurelian's since both emperors elected a solar deity (Elagabal for Elagabalus and Sol for Aurelian) to be their patrons. However, as previously discussed, these emperors had very different ways of going about their religious reforms. Elagabalus's reign is tainted by the depraved behavior as well as the zealotry shown for this patron god Elagabal. He attempted to make Elagabal pre-eminent at the expense of other gods such as Jupiter Capitolinus who guaranteed of Roman sovereignty and victory. As could be expected, this subverted the very foundations of the imperial government.<sup>57</sup> While initially tolerated, Elagabalus' excessive zeal began to wane on much of the population in Rome. Even those close to him began to distance themselves and eventually his grandmother, Julia Maesa, had him assassinated so that her other grandson Severus Alexander could assume power.<sup>58</sup> While similar, there are significant factors that contrast the reign of Elagabalus and the reign of Aurelian.

This shows the significant differences between the Illyrian emperors (such as Aurelian) and the Severi (Septimus Severus, Caracalla, Elagabalus, Severus Alexander). According to Halsberghe, the Severi brought eastern influences on Roman culture with Elagabalus' promotion of sun Elagabal being the most extreme but accurate example. The Illyrian emperors had purely Roman motivations. "The Severi were completely Eastern in everything. This trait culminated in the rule of Elagabalus who went to extremes in his attempt to replace the Roman by the strictly Syrian in Rome itself...Alexander, thought to gain security and support by giving equal importance to the Roman and Hellenistic-Eastern elements in his policy. The Illyrian emperors

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<sup>57</sup> Turcan, Robert. *The Cults of the Roman Empire*. Translated by Antonia Nevill. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1996., 179

<sup>58</sup> Turcan, *Cults of the Roman Empire*, 183

reject both courses; their motivation was purely Roman.”<sup>59</sup> This would have led Aurelian make a more palatable “Roman” *Sol Invictus* for the people of the Empire. By incorporating Sol into the well-established religious system, he would not be making the Roman pantheon more foreign but rather be making Sol more “Roman.” Yet, the popularity of Sol would have more people gravitate toward the imperial religious system.

Though the scene of Aurelian and Elagabal may be fictitious, if one were to read between the lines and look at the scene at a different angle, it may show a possible but in no ways clear origin between Aurelian and Sol. Aurelian was clearly a commander in the Roman army. Before his eventual campaigns in the east and west to unify the Roman Empire, he would have traveled through much of the empire, battling barbarian encroachments into Roman territory and putting down rebellious generals. During this time, he would have come across many different cultures on his way through the empire. The cult of Sol was already gaining popularity before he came to power and there is little doubt, he would have come across at least some examples of solar worship. Indeed, even within his own army, the cult to Mithras was already popular and the deity had strong solar associations.

While popular amongst the troops and other populations within the Roman Empire, Mithras and other solar associated cults would not have been able to accomplish what Aurelian hoped to achieve. Cults such as Mithras and Isis while having a strong sense of universality amongst its practitioners, had no sacred center and instead relied upon autonomous cult-like places. The advantages of these locations were that the cults could reach a larger, more diverse population.<sup>60</sup> However, these cults lacked the central administration that could have provided a

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<sup>59</sup> Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, 137

<sup>60</sup> Fowden, Garth. "Polytheist Rome: Toward Cultural Universalism Within Empire." In *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, 37-60. PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY: Princeton University Press, 1993. Accessed April 8, 2021. doi:10.2307/j.ctv13gvjmr.10., 42

unifying symbol for the Empire. Aurelian's Sol would not have such an issue. With the backing of the imperial government, Sol would provide that moral foundation to aid in the healing of the Roman Empire. Its solar associations would create a sense of universality amongst the peoples of the Empire. After all, all things lie beneath the rising sun.

Though he never takes new title, Aurelian's deification had a significant influence on the cult of Sol. Having a temple and a college of priests associated with the cult certainly added to the legitimacy of Sol's elevation. While these facts are indeed important, the backing of a divine emperor would have raised the importance of Sol beyond question. Aurelian's status as divine emperor would influence the imperial throne for years to come. Indeed, "at the end of the third century, one had to behave towards the sovereign as if before the idol of a god, falling at his feet and lifting a fold of the imperial purple to one's lips."<sup>61</sup> Yet this was not radical change. While Aurelian may have been the first add the title *deus* to his name, it was no longer taboo as it was with previous emperors and the practice is continued by Aurelian's successors.<sup>62</sup>

Though unique in practice, there was nothing extreme with Aurelian's religious reforms. The emperor appears to be very careful not to upset the old order yet implemented many influential reforms. Aurelian was able to elevate the god Sol within Roman religion not to challenge the old pantheon but rather breathe life back into the system itself. Sol would create a sense of universality amongst citizens of the Empire, as they could associate their own solar deities with the new god. The god would have its own temple, priests to maintain it, and all with the backing of the emperor whose divine status would ensure the implementation of the cult. This solar worship could bridge the political gap between east and west and bring a sense of

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<sup>61</sup> Turcan, *The Gods of Ancient Rome*, 143

<sup>62</sup> Watson, *Aurelian in the Third Century*, 188

harmony to Greeks, Syrians, Danubians, Egyptians, and Anatolians,<sup>63</sup> as well as other peoples within the Empire.

### Conclusion

Much of contemporary scholarship would assess Aurelian's actions in elevating Sol to such a position as the emperor's attempts to institute an imperial centered cult in a henotheistic or even monotheistic fashion. But this is unfounded. There is a trend in modern scholarship to relate Aurelian's shift toward greater autocracy and the goal of having the empire under one ruler to monotheistic motivations for Sol's elevation. However, there is no evidence that Aurelian wished to implement a new solar monotheism under the imperial seal.<sup>64</sup> Much of the information that supports the argument of solar monotheism is found in the notorious *Historia Augusta* and an over analysis of the coinage from the period. While it is tempting to take this information for face value, we must be cautious not to draw too many conclusions from them. The *Historia Augusta's* material is questionable at best, and while the coinage does provide an idea on what the emperor's intentions were, it is not as clear as it to be believed.

Aurelian had no intention on replacing the old gods with Sol. In fact, polytheism was very much alive during this period. By building the temple to Sol within the *pomerium* of Rome, he was able to give the cult a great deal of legitimacy. This action did not lead Sol to supersede the traditional pantheon gods. Rather, it simply made the cult on par with the other imperial cults. This can also be seen in the priesthood as well. The priests of Sol were members of other pantheon cults and vice versa. These priests were drawn from the same classes as other priests and carried with them no additional authority. Aurelian himself never ascended to any higher

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<sup>63</sup> Lewis, "A Prince Necessary," 134

<sup>64</sup> Watson, *Aurelian in the Third Century*, 197

religious position. He continued to hold the position of *Pontifex Maximus* denoting that the emperor was still the head of all cults within the Roman Empire.

Though his contemporaries often call him harsh in his rule,<sup>65</sup> Aurelian knew creating more divisions shortly after bringing the Empire back together would only lead to more civil strife. Aurelian had already shown his willingness to work with minority groups in the Empire as seen in his intervention on behalf of the Christian Church in removing Paul of Samosata from his residence in Antioch. Hurley's argument against Aurelian's planned persecution of the Christians shows that the emperor was not willing to create anymore enemies within the Empire. To alienate such an influential group within Rome's borders would have only caused more issues. With that in mind, it would not have made sense for Aurelian to alienate the influential cult priests in Rome, as well as the millions of other polytheists within the Empire, with a monotheistic solar cult. For an emperor, whose goal was to bring stability back to the Roman Empire, upsetting the old order shortly after bringing the Empire back together would have been disastrous.

One must also remember Aurelian's religious conservatism. Aurelian was much like his predecessors in that he too would associate himself with the gods as a way of providing legitimacy to reign. Examples of this have been seen in Aurelian portraying himself alongside gods such Hercules, Mars, and Jupiter. Towards the end of his reign, we see Aurelian portray himself in relation to Sol in inscriptions and on coinage from the time. Yet, this was not unique to Aurelian's reign. While Aurelian was certainly unique in his promotion of Sol, it was not uncommon for emperors to elevate perceived patron deities. Gallienus had declared that he was

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<sup>65</sup> Eutropius, *Abridgement of Roman History*, 9:13

under the special protection of Sol.<sup>66</sup> Elagabalus chose Elagabal as his patron deity and eventually the emperor Constantine would have Christ as his patron.

However, we cannot subscribe to the notion that the elevation of Sol was only for personal interest. The extent from which Aurelian went through in promoting Sol would prove otherwise. The resources the emperor dedicated to the temple show that he wanted Sol to have some prominence within Roman religion. The creation of the college of priests to Sol show that Aurelian clearly intended for this cult to continue during and after his reign. While Aurelian had and continued to associate himself with gods such as Hercules and Mars, his imagery with Sol cannot be ignored, as the god is clearly being held to some significance. Yet polytheism was alive and flourishing within the Empire during Aurelian's reign and despite the accusations of Lactantius and Eusebius, Aurelian appeared to have no intention on resuming any persecutions against the monotheistic Christians.

The revival of Roman religion would allow the peoples of Empire, no matter their geographic location or cultural beliefs, to look toward Rome with a sense of commonality. They could continue to worship their traditional polytheistic gods, while also paying homage to Sol and the emperor. Sol sought not to replace the gods of the many faiths within the Empire but rather create a sense of universality amongst the people. Just as all citizens could look to the emperor as a ruler of all, so too could they look to Sol as a god all had in common.

Sol would continue to influence the Roman Empire well after Aurelian's death. Aurelian's successors Tacitus and Probus associated themselves with Sol on their coinage. The emperor Probus would continue with Aurelian's policies and the elevation of Sol. He is depicted alongside Sol on several coins from his reign while other examples include inscriptions depicting

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<sup>66</sup> Southern, *The Roman Empire*, 104

the god's name of *Deus Sol Invictus*.<sup>67</sup> The emperors Diocletian and Maximian also showed favor to Sol though much less than either Aurelian or Probus. Both emperors were depicted alongside the god on their respected coinage often holding a whip or a globe. By the reign of Galerius, Sol had once again become the paramount god of the Empire.<sup>68</sup>

With the reign of Constantine, Sol would continue to be a prominent deity in the Roman Empire, yet it would be at his point in time when the cult would begin to decline. Both Sol Invictus and Victoria were the *dei militares* of Constantine's armies and he would continue to hold the god in high regard during much of his reign. But with the rise of Christianity, the cult of Sol would steadily lose popularity with the emperor whose support was greatly needed for the promotion of the cult. The early Church Fathers saw the cult as a competitor and a possible threat to Christianity. The saint Ambrose of Milan "well knew that the gods of Rome still enjoyed enough prestige to render their disproof an urgent necessity."<sup>69</sup> Christ would become Constantine's patron and Sol would quickly fall out of favor.

Eventually, the inclusiveness of polytheism would succumb to the unrelenting pressure of monotheistic Christianity. Polytheists would soon turn their backs on their old gods and embrace Christ as their new and only god. Yet Sol's influence can still be seen. The god would have a profound effect on the representations of Christ as well as subsequent royal ideology of both Byzantium and Christendom.<sup>70</sup> The solar crown, often depicting the divine virtue of saints and other prominent Christians can trace its roots back to the solar imagery of Aurelian as we can see from the coinage during the emperor's reign.

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<sup>67</sup> Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, 164

<sup>68</sup> Halsberghe 166

<sup>69</sup> Fowden, "Polytheist Rome," 48

<sup>70</sup> Watson, *Aurelian in the Third Century*, 202

Though he came to power in the typical fashion of being backed by the army, Aurelian was able to pull the Roman Empire from the brink and consolidate it under one rule once again. In his short reign he was able to begin the process of healing after decades of civil strife and external invasion. Aurelian would begin this healing process by breathing life back into Rome's religious sphere ensuring the population that the days of chaos were now behind them and that a new era was under way. Aurelian would accomplish this by elevating Sol to a new prestigious position that made it equal to the other deities of the Roman pantheon. With a temple and priests to manage it, Aurelian would use the universality of the sun to provide a common deity for all peoples of the Roman Empire regardless of culture or geographic location. His success can be seen in his successors who continued to favor Sol throughout their reigns. Constantine's favor towards Christianity would cause Sol to lose imperial favor and spell the end for the cult. Yet, the god's influences could still be seen well after its fall. If Aurelian had lived longer, who knows to what lengths he would have gone with his new patron god. Aurelian was able to restore the world to Roman rule, and the world basked in the light of the unconquered sun.



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